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Todd Grimson

the bad father

My father got me drunk when I was 14, not too long after my birthday, and I have a scar on my forehead as a result. He and my mother had, at that time, been divorced for maybe three years. The reason for the divorce was his incorrigible womanizing, or unfaithfulness, and this gave him a certain illicit glamour in my eyes.

That night he took me out to eat with him at a Chinese restaurant called Hung Far Low, which was located in a bad part of downtown. You had to go upstairs to find the restaurant, and I liked the feeling of secretiveness and criminality I imagined to suffuse the atmosphere there. My father, who had a certain charisma, with his slicked-back Brylcreem hair, wisecracking and cocky, flirted with waitresses everywhere, just by his manner, he would seem to presuppose that there was some interesting unanswered question in the air. That night for a reason I've forgotten he wanted me to taste alcohol. It was sort of a joke. The waitress went along.

When asked what I wanted to drink, I very coolly said, "A margarita," and just this, my choice, the fact that I had a ready choice, amused my father and the waitress no end. The margarita tasted wonderful to me. I hid my pleasure, absorbed in acting as if I did this all the time. I think I had four of them before we left. I have no idea how much bourbon my father put away.

Out in the car, we were conspiratorially pleased with the situation, and whatever we said to each other seemed very funny at the time. As he drove me home, however, a change came over him, and my father sped up, really flooring it along a straight stretch on Stark Street, turning to say to me, with a mean smile, "Want me to slow down? Am I going too fast?" I wouldn't reply to him, and I was angry at the stupid attempt to scare me. He kept asking me if I wanted him to slow down and although I put my hands against the dash I wouldn't give in, I wouldn't say a word. I was furious, and he was in turn furious with me. Nothing I did was ever enough to prove myself to him. He was competitive, and if for instance I grew taller than him and was a more natural, easier star at sports than he had ever been, back in North Dakota — why, then the arena of endeavor would be changed, and we would move on to whether I was tough enough in fights, if I was a man who could defend himself, or if I was a good worker willing to start at the bottom, etcetera. He hated me, I thought, and I was enraged at this — though I worshipped him, in some ways.

He couldn't stop the car in time. He slammed on the brakes, but the vehicle in front of us loomed up, I knew we weren't going to make it, just some dark car stopped at a red light, waiting for us.

I don't recall the actual impact, though later on I would have bad dreams about it that would jerk me awake. The next thing I knew, my father was looking at me with the dumbest fucking look on his face, blood on his forehead and chin.

"What happened, Joe? What happened?"

It was like a bad actor pretending to be drunk, and I despised him. I glanced up where my own head had met the windshield: there was a round, shattery hole. Blood was collecting in my lap. I realized my head had caused the hole. Some people had come out of their houses. Absurdly, someone told me to put my head between my knees. I was calm and composed. I had no fear. I was glad to see the policeman, professionally passing through my field of vision, in no hurry, no emotion whatsoever visible on his face. An ambulance came and took me away. I asked the attendant in back how many stitches he thought I would have.

Three years later, at seventeen, I was having dinner with my father out in deep Southeast Portland, at a restaurant he favored named Jimmy's Hut. The waitresses liked him here too, and for a while now they would let me accompany him into the back, into the bar. We would eat in there. I was not invited to drink, and I didn't care. I never thought of it.

My father might order anything on the menu, from pork chops with applesauce to chicken-fried steak, but all I ever wanted was a hamburger and french fries, with a Coke. I loved the hamburgers there, at Jimmy's Hut.

On this particular night, some kind of weird negotiation was going on. My father had gotten me to admit to him that I was a virgin, and I wasn't even embarrassed — he made me feel okay about it, man-to-man. One of the waitresses or barmaids, here in the dimly-lit "Elbow Room" — my father knew that I liked her, she was younger than the others, and she seemed to like me too. Patti wasn't working tonight, but as I was coming to understand it she lived in the motel across the street. She could look out of her window and see the images on the screen of the Division Street Drive-In, every night. That sounded great to me.

I was keeping my mouth shut, but I thought I knew what was going on. I didn't dare imagine it might be true, I didn't want to get too excited. This other barmaid, Claire, had called up Patti, then came back to the table and said, "Why don't you talk to her?" So my father went to the phone. Then he came by and said he was going to go see her, he'd be right back, and the way he smiled I figured it was going to come off, she wouldn't be able to resist his charm. And I knew that, although he liked to dicker, money was not a problem here. So it was just a matter of them agreeing on a price, and then I'd go over to Patti's room. I was in love with her then, a true swoon of romantic love, remembering what she looked like, her dark eyebrows and blond hair. She would have dark pubic hair, I supposed, and I was nearly beside myself with wanton visions of her smiling at me, that smile. I was in love.

But with this love came anxiety, and as time began to pass, I

began to wonder what was taking so long. Maybe she was telling him no, not under any circumstance, I was just too ugly, too repulsive to her. I found this hard to believe. I wasn't so bad.

Then, with the notion that maybe she had some sort of idiosyncratic, perverse reaction to me ... something unreasonable, that wasn't my fault — I began to dislike her. She was, after all, a failure in life, a whore. Fat men, ugly men — she'd do anyone, for money. These men would regard her with contempt.

You must understand, I was willing to forget all this in an instant, willing to utterly fall into selfless love in which state I would do anything for her, I would be devoted, I would save her — I went back and forth, waiting there in the Elbow Room booth.

I had been vaguely aware, as some other customers had come in, that the bartender didn't like me being in there by myself. I could tell just from the attitude of his body, I didn't even have to look over there or really meet his gaze. It was against the law, after all. So I wasn't really taken totally by surprise when Claire came and asked me to wait out front. The real surprise was in how she looked at me as she said this. I interpreted it to mean not only that she didn't much like me, but also that I was in a humiliating position, the wait had gone on so long I was an embarrassment to everyone concerned.

I walked out into the light of the main part of Jimmy's Hut, considered sitting on one of the stools at the counter and ordering a slice of coconut cream pie, a cup of coffee; in truth I would have been glad to have just rewound the last hour or so as if none of this other stuff had ever been contemplated, I could just wait for my dad like a kid and sooner or later he would return.

I couldn't do it. I went outside, and it was raining, dark in the gravel parking lot. My father's midnight blue Chrysler New Yorker was still parked there, so he had to be across the street. If I had been, underneath everything, rather frightened by the prospect of being left alone with Patti, it was exciting but also very scary — now, in this unfamiliar territory, heading across the busy street, I was much more scared, and sick. I didn't want to know the precise definition of my wound, of how my manhood had been injured. I had no real curiosity. The only thing that made me cross the street was the idea of my father watching me, of him thinking I would be afraid to face up to it. I couldn't win, whatever I did I was lost, I would lose, but I had to go through the motions, I had to make it worse, the worse it was the more I had to make sure.

I didn't know what room Patti was in, though it had to be one of these in front, so she could see the screen. Back across Division, down past Jimmy's Hut, I saw some kind of action, huge figures moving, in color, shadows and colored lights in silvery rain. I looked at the big drive-in sign. I looked at the sign with the name of the motel. The "No" turned off, next to the neon orangey red "Vacancy."

I heard my father's voice. I knocked right on the door, the wet blue door. I heard another voice, Patti's I guess, and then my father opened up. He looked surprised to see me, there in his undershirt, his hair sort of mussed up.

"What're you doing here?" he said, and I just shook my head. I wanted to hit him, he must have felt it, I wanted to kill him but I could not. Behind him, in the bed, Patti had the covers pulled up to hide her nakedness from me. I didn't like the way she looked, but it didn't matter. It struck me how much taller I was than him, though that meant nothing. I was still raw, I didn't know how the world really worked.

"Why don't you come in out of the rain, you big lug?" he said now, changing on me. "I was just coming over to get you. Patti, uh, has been wondering when I'd get off my ass and bring you back."

"I'm taking off," I said, and I walked off into the rain. I walked all the way home. Two hours, soaked to the skin.

When I was twenty-two, I had quit school and been fired from a couple of jobs, then I quit one down at Columbia Welding after three days. I was living in a shitty apartment, and when my car broke down my mom called my father and got him to lend me his Chrysler New Yorker so I could use it to look for work. Actually, I was content being on unemployment for a while, but I liked driving the Chrysler, even though it was way too big and used a lot of gas. It felt good to drive it, especially at night. My father had another car, a new Buick. He was married again, his fourth wife.

I was driving down on Williams Avenue one day, on the way to visit my sister, when I saw this girl — she had to be a prostitute — who really stopped me dead. I was a little wary, as this is the black part of town and I didn't know it

very well, I didn't really know where I was, but I drove back around and came by to see her again. She was a white girl, standing on the corner of Monroe. There were other, more obvious whores, in short skirts and such, at other corners along the one-way street. The whole scene was strangely exciting to me.

I came back at night, and didn't see her, and then about a week later drove by special and felt really exhilarated when I saw her again. I drove by several times. It was a weekday, about 4:30 p.m. She looked sad, and she wasn't dressed like a prostitute. She wore blue jeans and a brown jacket, and her dark brown hair was up under a watchcap. She could have been a poor girl waiting for a bus, except for the fact that she was standing at Williams and Monroe.

I drove around the block up ahead, by a closed-down ribs place, and some black guys in a white Lincoln Continental pulled up by me, and the driver said, "You-all see somethin' you like?"

I went away. The Chrysler was conspicuous. How many times had I come around? I didn't have any money. Besides, that wasn't what I wanted, to be a trick.

I told myself I was just curious, I wanted to talk to her, she looked too intelligent to be living this degraded type of life. I thought about her all the time. I wanted to save her, at the same time I must admit I was excited by the idea of her with her tricks.

I tried to imagine her daily life. She would live in a house with other young whores, eat fried chicken and potato salad and cornbread, soul food, and have a black pimp who fucked her, enslaved her and beat her up. Was she a heroin addict? Yes, probably. I wasn't sure. To numb herself out while giving blowjobs and being fucked in the ass.

One night I drove down there, and parked a few blocks away, near Emanuel Hospital. I sat down and watched, from an overgrown vacant lot, while she leaned over, talked into the window, and then got in someone's car and they drove away. A black girl in a white fur jacket and blond wig was left there. In a half hour or so my prostitute had returned. She was eating a candy bar. The white Lincoln Continental came by.

I left. I was obsessed, and while I was ashamed of what I was doing, I was not ashamed enough to stay away for more than a few days. Then I would just want one look at her face. I would be going someplace else, and I would give myself the excuse to drive by once only, to see if she was there. Often she was not. But then, when I saw her again, after thinking she was gone, that she'd been murdered or O.D.'d or gotten out of the life ... when I saw her again, I was so elated, and by now I knew she was aware of the car. I was embarrassed, imagining what she must think of me. All I could think of was to sometime pick her up, like a trick, give her all the money I possessed — much more than she would expect — and then I would ask for nothing, I would just give her the money and depart.

I had no girlfriend at this time, though I did have some friends I saw socially, we drank and did cocaine, smoked pot, but I was so poor I was ambitionless. I told no one about the prostitute.

Finally, one night I drove by, I hadn't been around in a week or so — this time, she ran out into the street, yelled something at me, "Hey," anyway I was shocked, but since she had called to me I slowed down, it took me nearly a block to pull over. I sat there mournfully, waiting for her to curse me and tell me I was a creep. The passenger door was unlocked.

She got in. Immediately, I smelled her perfume, and some other smell, like a melted candy bar on an ancient telephone pole, candy wrapper a hundred years old.

"Why don't you ever stop?" she asked, a bit breathlessly. Her voice was higher and more immature than I had imagined, but I had expected my imaginings to be all wrong.

"I never have any money," I answered.

"Drive us somewhere, okay? Out of the neighborhood." She lit a cigarette, and then shrewdly said, in a few moments, "I figure either you're insane, and you're gonna kill me, or you're really stuck on me, right?"

I nodded. She knew what I meant. She asked me my name. Joe. Hers was Crystal. She had a joint in her purse, and she lit it with the Chrysler's cigarette-lighter, that glowing circle of hot orange. We smoked the joint, driving around, and then went to my messy apartment.

She wanted me to do something for her. I said sure. She needed enough money to go back to San Antonio, she said. Saturday night, she said, naked, lying on top of me, there was this guy who would have all this money deliv-

ered to him, as part of a dope deal. She wanted me to take him off.

"You're big and strong," she said, touching me once more. I could sense some nervousness, though not there in her hand. There was nothing unbelievable or especially depraved about the sex. I wanted to cry, but that was not something I did. This was back in 1974; Nixon had just resigned a month or two back.

I kissed her, and Crystal let me. She was more or less inscrutable but I wanted to let my love come out, even if it was tainted, impure. She was using me, and I consented, I deserved to be all used up.

"Are you smart?" Crystal asked, looking deep into my eyes. I didn't know if, in her terms, I was, or could be, and I didn't reply. "You might be," she said, and pressed herself against me. There were miscellaneous bruises here and there on her body, scratches, signs of wear. A dirty bandaid on her vulnerable bare foot.

It was a reckless plan.

There is this motel up a few blocks from Williams, on San Rafael, way before you reach Monroe. It looked at that time sort of dilapidated-modern, and built as it was some distance away from any busy street, you wondered what they could have ever had in mind. It was turquoise, mostly, and salmon-pink. A red Coke machine down below, next to the office. Inside the office, the flickering bluish light of a TV. We snuck past this, and went upstairs.

Crystal had on jeans, a faded print blouse, and a letterman's jacket, cream body and wine-red sleeves, too big for her, from Jesuit High. Her hair was down, dark and slightly permed.

"Earl," she said, knocking on the door.

"Yeah?"

"Walker sent me. I brought you some food. Barbecue. Let me in."

"I'm busy, man. Gina's here."

"Well, Walker sent me by." Crystal hesitated, looked over at me. "If you want to, maybe we could do something like a two-on-one."

Inside, Earl laughed. Every second we waited, wondering whether or not he'd open the door, stretched out and felt unlucky, like unless everything went as smoothly as in a dream it would all go wrong.

Another thing was, we hadn't counted on the girl. I looked at Crystal, silently asking her everything, answering my own questions, in some way detached from the specific situation — I wanted to be there, doing this, and I didn't care where or who it was.

Earl opened the door, smiling, a very dark black man, shorter than me, and I crashed in and hit him as hard as I could with the gun Crystal had given me earlier from her purse. Gina screamed, and continued to kind of carry on as the door was closed and Crystal said we'll kill you if you don't shut up.

I hit Earl more than I needed to, it quelled my nervousness, and when I pointed the gun at naked Gina she peed herself, there on the bed. I felt dirty after that.

"Where's the money?"

Gina said she didn't know. Earl pretended to be more out of it than he was, acting like I'd knocked him out. Crystal pulled down his boxer shorts, squirted lighter fluid on his private parts, stood back and lit a match.

Earl told us where.

We tied them up, taped their mouths, but didn't harm them anymore before we left. Crystal only seemed to get scared now, breathing harder, eyes darting around, when we went back outside.

There was only one way down, and that meant walking past the office again. The guy in there was a smackhead, he and Walker had known each other in Nam. So the guy, Warren, might be on the nod or he might open up, if he suspected anything. He had some guns.

"What's happening?" he said, stepping out, friendly enough, spaced. "Your name's Cathy, right?"

"Yeah, Warren. This is my date, Bob."

"Cathy, what're you doing here?"

"I had to pick up some stuff."

"Oh. Right. Later, man."

"Later."

Warren watched us walk across the street and get into the Chrysler. We'd thought we better park close in case something went wrong and we needed to run.

Crystal took some pills on the way to the airport, to cool herself down. She

was happy, sure, we'd divvied up the money in the car, and once she bought her ticket and we were in the United waiting area, sitting down, she started to laugh. She liked me better by now, too, but I could tell she wasn't completely at ease about my knowing she was going to San Antone.

"They think I'm from California," she said, and laughed, childishly, younger than she'd seemed up until now. She didn't look very much like how she'd seemed when I'd only seen her for a moment or two at a time, driving past. But she was fine.

"How did you happen to come out here?"

"Everyone always asks me that," she said. But she wasn't really being critical. "I came out with my boyfriend, a year or so ago, and we got into trouble right away. He's in prison now."

It was sort of awkward, saying goodbye to her when her plane was called. We really didn't know each other, we didn't even know if we liked each other. So we hugged, and perfunctorily kissed, but it didn't feel right. I didn't know what to say. The last look between us was like we had just met.

Two days later, my father wanted his car back. He was going to sell it. He'd met some guy in a tavern who was going to come over and check it out.

I could remember, back when my father and my mother were still married, one time he'd bought an outboard motor when he didn't own a boat. Out in the garage, in a big oil drum filled with water, he'd pull the cord and start that motor, and marvel at it, and my sister and I would marvel too. But there was no place for that outboard motor to go.

Predictably, you might say, on the third morning after Crystal left I woke up with a terrible burning. I knew what it was, and I just thought it was funny, in a way I didn't mind, I was glad. I went to the County health and had the diagnosis confirmed. They gave me a shot.

My younger sister took me, and afterwards we visited some fucked-up friends of hers out on Southeast 74th, near Powell. It was a white clapboard house, where everyone seemed to come and go, and my sister got so drunk on red Almaden wine that she passed out. I stayed up talking and smoking cigarettes, all night, with this girl named Mary Sue. Before it was light we went for a long walk and ended up at a diner, where we had pancakes and coffee with a lot of truck drivers who seemed to be on speed.

Back at that house, I fell asleep on the couch in the living room, and my sister woke me up at noon or so to tell me that she'd just talked to our mom, something had happened to our dad.

At the hospital, when we were allowed in to see him, my father looked horrible. He'd been beaten up very badly, he had a concussion and both legs were broke. Furthermore, they'd cut off his left ear.

He'd been uncooperative with the police. He wouldn't say who had done it, he wouldn't say a word.

My father's wife was in there, and she glared at me. She was a barmaid, and so ugly, with a scrunched-up mean-looking dried apricot face, she looked most like a 70 year old man, with glasses and a yellow wig. She had never liked me, I don't know why, and I didn't care. I had hardly seen my father these last few years, and he had come down in the world. His hair had gone gray, and his brown face was sunken in around his unnaturally white false teeth. It seemed fair to say that alcohol, for one thing, had taken its toll.

Only when I heard that "niggers" had done it, and the Chrysler had been set on fire, did I begin to suspect that my father's misfortune had any connection to me. I wasn't exactly sorry, or repentant, I was just listening to what was going on around me, the ugly fourth wife was muttering something ridiculous about how her son (an ex-Gypsy Joker, if you're ever an ex-Gypsy Joker, who worked in a gas station out in Estacada) and her son's friends would wreak revenge.

I was tired, and I yawned, without trying to cover my mouth, and just then, as I was yawning, my father opened his eyes and saw me there. He really looked awful, his face swollen purple and red, white bandages around the crown of his head, black stitches showing. He may have been in a lot of pain.

He recognized me, and spat to one side, maybe just to clear his throat, and then he said, malevolently, "I told them it was you. I told them it was *you* in that goddamned car! Do you see what they did to me? How do you like it? I told them where to find you — I gave them your address."

My sister drove me down to Salem, though she was still shaky and sick from being so drunk the night before, and I took the Greyhound bus south from there to Sacramento before I started east.